U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Montenegro

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

Montenegro is a mixed parliamentary and presidential republic with a population of approximately 630,000. Montenegro became independent from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in June 2006, following a national referendum that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe found to be in accordance with international standards. Parliamentary elections in Sepember 2006 initiated the effort to form a multiparty government. A new constitution approved by the assembly in October 2007 retained the country's existing governmental system, in which both the unicameral parliament and the president are elected by popular vote. The government generally respects the human rights of its citizens and has continued efforts to address human rights violations; however, problems persist to various degrees, including abusive and arbitrary arrests; police mistreatment of suspects in detention; lengthy pretrial detention and trials; police impunity; attacks on journalists; selective enforcement of the law; substandard prison conditions; widespread corruption; trafficking in persons; discrimination against ethnic minorities; and violence against women and children, along with some instances of societal discrimination against religious minorities. The country also continues to host a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

Part 2

The U.S. government is continuing to assist Montenegro in building democratic institutions and instilling democratic values. Of the U.S. government's top three assistance priorities, two--fostering rule of law and developing human and institutional capacity--directly support the goal of promoting democratic principles and practices. The third top assistance priority--closing the north/south development gap--also serves to promote democracy, since the gap is a potential source of instability as many northerners are members of ethnic or religious minorities and/or voted against Montenegrin independence in 2006.

Part 3

In order to assist Montenegro's democratic development, the embassy is concentrating its assistance on developing human and institutional capacity and institutional checks and balances. In terms of institutional development, one area of focus is helping the parliament to become more effective in its representation and more accountable in its actions. Additional U.S. assistance helps foster a professional and independent media, while U.S. support for civil society helps advance the overdue implementation of reform laws that may change the public attitude of passive acquiescence to corruption, creating a base for serious efforts for good governance and transparency.

U.S. assistance is also focused on promoting rule of law and building institutional capabilities to deal with crime and corruption. Montenegro's judicial branch, arguably its weakest branch of government, needs reform. Through previous programs, the embassy has had positive results working with civil courts to eliminate case backlog. The embassy is planning a study trip of judges to the U.S.; their program would include ethics training, observation of court proceedings, and work with court clerks to learn how cases move through the U.S. civil and criminal justice systems. The United States will also continue work with the police to improve their ability to tackle crime and corruption. The embassy is establishing a Resident Legal Advisor's office to assist law enforcement and judicial authorities to strengthen their ability to fight crime.

Exchanges of local officials to the United States and U.S. visitors to Montenegro are an effective way of overcoming the country's isolation and exposing its citizens to the benefits of a multiethnic, multireligious, and democratic society. The embassy sends over 50 individuals every year to the United States. To promote bilateral exchanges, the embassy continues to nominate students and scholars for various academic programs. The embassy also frequently nominates journalists, human rights advocates, religious leaders, and police and political leaders for the U.S. government's International Visitor Leadership Program. Exchange participants, ranging from high-school students to Fulbright scholars, usually return to Montenegro as strong supporters of democratic values. During 2007 the embassy sponsored visits by eight U.S. speakers who gave talks on a broad range of topics, including an American civil rights leader who spoke about the importance of diversity.

Part 4

The U.S. government continues to support a wide range of human rights and democratic governance activities. As part of the embassy's strategy to promote the rule of law, the embassy tracked developments in human rights cases, including war crimes trials, investigations into police mistreatment of detainees, and lawsuits threatening freedom of the press. The embassy also continued its parliamentary strengthening program by providing training for political party caucuses and monitoring the work of deputies in the national parliament.

The U.S. ambassador has met with political party leaders, including the opposition, to emphasize the need to build a democratic society. In addition to various public events, the ambassador also has met with NGO and civil society representatives to emphasize the importance of their work and learn about major issues, including the status of refugees and IDPs, corruption, and judicial reform. To assist in combating human trafficking, the embassy provided recommendations to the government's Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator**.** U.S. officials also have met with the heads of major religious communities, and the ambassador hosted an Iftaar reception for the Islamic community in a provincial town. In addition, the Ambassador hosted a Thanksgiving lunch that brought together various refugee and IDP families, as well as the head of the Government Office for Refugee-IDP Affairs. These efforts sought to strengthen local institutions while drawing attention to the struggles faced by victims of trafficking, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable populations. The United States is also sponsoring media trainers to work with local journalists on anticorruption reporting.

Embassy outreach, including annual public reports on human rights, human and narcotics trafficking, and religious freedom, help facilitate public and private dialogue on how the country can do more to promote human rights.

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